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**DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION AND NATURAL RESOURCES
COMSTOCK HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION**

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Press Release
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A NEW INTERPRETATION OF THE COMSTOCK OFFERED

Andria Daley, Chair of the Comstock Historic District Commission, is pleased to announce a reassessment of the earliest period of the history of Nevada and the mining West which appears in the most recent issue of the Nevada Historical Society Quarterly. The Quarterly includes two articles regarding Comstock history, "Drunks, Fools and the Insane" by Ron James, State Historic Preservation Officer, and "The Comstock Neighborhood and Nineteenth-Century Photographs" by Bernadette Francke, Inspector/Clerk of the Comstock Historic District Commission.

James is the administrator of the Division of Historic Preservation and Archeology and also serves on the Commission. He argues that authors have unfairly characterized the Comstock Mining District's earliest prospectors and miners as drunks and fools. Using his background in folklore and history, James is able to demonstrate that early ground breakers such as James "Old Virginny" Finney and Henry "Pancake" Comstock were in fact hard workers and shrewd capitalists.

These miners failed to acquire millions from what was later developed into one of the richest mines ever discovered, but that failure in itself grew out of an educated, reasoned decision. Repeated gold rushes in the West had failed to yield prosperous results, and Finney, Comstock, and their comrades apparently realized that chances were slim that they had discovered a truly productive ore body. When offered thousands of dollars - more than they had earned after years toiling at gold panning - these miners saw it as a good deal. They certainly regarded cash in hand for no work as a better bet than gambling that they could extract more from the ground.

The later revelation that the earliest miners had sold a bonanza worth millions for a few thousand dollars made them the object of ridicule. When William Wright published The Big Bonanza in 1876 under the name "Dan De Quille," he exploited the opportunity and codified several stories which characterized Finney, Comstock and others as drunks, fools, and insane. This has remained the standard interpretation of some of the earliest founders of Nevada and the mining West. James's work conclusively demonstrates that past judgment has been unfair and that these miners should be viewed in a new light.

Francke's article developed from her survey of historic photographs which has resulted in a comprehensive collection of available images of the Comstock Historic District. One of the

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largest landmarks in the nation, the Comstock has received little systematic attention in cataloguing the existing images from its past. The Comstock Historic District Commission undertook the project to offer residents and researchers easy access to available information. Francke's article provides an opportunity to understand the new insight which can be gained by using historic photographs as a starting point for research. She underscores the fact that Virginia City was once a thriving community filled with people living in an ordinary fashion rather than a place of mythic heroes of tall tales as authors have commonly characterized it. To continue this research, the Comstock Historic District Commission encourages people who have historic photographs of the Comstock to contact the agency at 847-0281 so the material can be reproduced.

Together, the James and Francke articles provide alternative ways to view the earliest period in Nevada's development, and they offer a new understanding of one of the most important mining districts in the world. Issues of the Quarterly can be obtained through the Nevada Historical Society at 688-1191. Subscriptions and individual copies are available for purchase.

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For more information contact Andria Daley, Chair of the Comstock Historic District Commission or Bernadette Francke at 847-0281. Ron James can be contacted at 687-5138.